NCA

VOC FOR PGM/FN

BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5973 JULY 10, 1978
MARK HOPKINS/BERLIN

SUMMITS -- THE BERLIN AIRLIFT

ANNCR:

PRESIDENT CARTER IS SCHEDULED TO VISIT A MEMORIAL TO THE BERLIN AIRLIFT DURING HIS TRIP TO WEST BERLIN. VOA'S MARK HOPKINS HAS THIS REPORT ON THE FAMOUS AIR BRIDGE THAT SUPPLIED THE BLOCKADED BERLIN THIRTY YEARS AGO.

VOICE:

AT THE PEAK OF THE AIRLIFT THE STREAM OF AMERICAN CEE-FIFTY FOUR CARGO PLANES AND THE BRITISH LANCASTERS FLOWED INTO BERLIN AT THE RATE OF ONE EVERY NINETY SECONDS...HOUR AFTER HOUR...DAY AND NIGHT...SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. THE AIRLIFT THAT BEGAN IN THE MORNING OF JUNE TWENTY-SIX, NINETEEN FORTY EIGHT, WENT ON FOR MORE THAN A YEAR, UNTIL THE FALL OF NINETEEN FORTY-NINE, ON SEPTEMBER THIRTIETH. BY THEN, THE BLOCKADE OF BERLIN, ORDERED BY THE SOVIET UNION'S JOSEF STALIN, HAD BEEN BROKEN. STALIN HAD CLOSED THE ROAD AND RAIL LINKS FROM WHAT IS NOW WEST GERMANY INTO BERLIN IN A TOUGH MOVE TO PRESSURE THE AMERICAN, BRITISH AND FRENCH FORCES OUT OF THE OCCUPIED CITY. PRESIDENT HARRY TRUMAN CONSIDERED BREAKING THROUGH THE BLOCKADE BY LAND WITH AN AMERICAN ARMORED COLUMN. HE REJECTED THAT, BUT REFUSED TO GIVE IN TO STALIN'S PRESSURES.

THE FIRST TWO-MOTORED CEE-FORTY SEVEN AMERICAN TRANSPORT PLANES CARRIED LESS THAN THREE TONS OF CARGO. THERE WERE FEWER THAN ONE HUNDRED IN EUROPE. THERE WERE TWO MILLION BERLINERS TO BE FED, TO BE KEPT WARM AND HEALTHY, TO BE CLOTHED. FIRST THE CEE-FORTY SEVENS, THEN THE LARGER FOUR ENGINED AMERICAN, BRITISH AND FRENCH TRANSPORT PLANES, CARRIED EVERYTHING FROM COAL

TO MEDICINES, TO MILK AND COFFEE, TO LIGHT BULBS AND TEXTILES -- TO METAL SHEETS FOR A NEW AIRPORT. PILOTS FLEW TWO AND THREE ROUND TRIPS DURING SOMETIMES EIGHTEEN HOUR DAYS. TWO OF THREE AIR CORRIDORS HANDLED INCOMING PLANES, THE THIRD THE OUTGOING, IN A CONTINUOUS PATTERN. SEVENTY FIVE FLIERS DIED IN ACCIDENTS.

SOVIET FIGHTERS HARRASSED THE ALLIED SUPPLY PLANES, AND THE SOVIETS SENT UP HUGE OBSERVATION BALLOONS ALONG THE CORRIDORS, BUT SOVIET FORCES NEVER ATTEMPTED DIRECTLY TO STOP THE AIRLIFT. THE AIRLIFT BUILT UP TO A SYSTEM THAT DELIVERED THREE THOUSAND TONS OF SUPPLIES A DAY. LIFE WAS NONETHELESS GRIM FOR BERLINERS, BUT THEY, TOO, REFUSED TO SUCCUMB TO STALIN'S ATTEMPT TO TAKE OVER ALL OF BERLIN.

STALIN LIFTED THE BLOCKADE IN MAY OF NINETEEN FORTY NINE. BUT GENERAL LUCIUS CLAY, THE AMERICAN COMMANDER IN BERLIN, UNTRUSTING OF WHAT THE RUSSIANS MIGHT DO, KEPT THE AIRLIFT GOING FOUR MONTHS LONGER, UNTIL STOCKS OF FOOD AND COAL WERE BUILT UP IN THE CITY. BY THEN NEARLY THREE HUNDRED THOUSAND FLIGHTS HAD FLOWN MORE THAN TWO MILLION TONS OF FOOD AND OTHER SUPPLIES INTO BERLIN.

MORE THAN THAT, THE AIRLIFT CHANGED POLITICS. THE BERLINERS, WHO IN DAYS BEFORE THE AIRLIFT WERE STILL SEEN AS THE DEFEATED ENEMY BY THE WESTERN ALLIES, BECAME AFTER THE AIRLIFT, ALLIES, TOO.

JS/RCS